

Environment at the cost of development?

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There is a perception that environmentalists hinder development with claims that developmental activities damage the environment. But this simply is not the truth. The objective of the environmentalist is to favour developmental activities with due consideration with environment. They try to visualise the short-term and long-term impacts on environment of a developmental activity and recommend the possible measures to prevent the negative consequences. If one cannot propose a correct solution or alternative to an environmental impact of some developmental activity, one cannot claim himself to be an environmentalist.

Environmentalists never oppose the developmental activities. Rather, a good environmentalist always explores alternatives and legitimate solutions to environmental problems. Development is the societal need and environmental issues come for the sustainability of the same developmental activity.

It is a well-known fact that poverty related degradation is much more harmful and destructive than development-related degradation. One has to perceive how much a development project could be helpful for both socio-economic growth and environmental conservation after its implementation. If we want development, we have to think seriously about problems facing the companies or industries in the implementation of certain projects in Nepal.

Seven years ago, the country suffered a big developmental setback due to the rejection of Arun Hydroelectricity Project. In the name of environmental conservation, Arun Hydro Project faced big challenges and was cancelled in its initial phase of implementation. Melamchi drinking water project is facing similar fate. The problem lies not in the Melamchi or Arun Hydro projects, but in some people's intention. These unscrupulous people are trying to obstruct the development in the name of environment. They advocate environmental issues without knowing the facts. Unknowingly someone may be playing an unethical game over developmental and environmental activities. We need to be careful over these groups who actually oppose development.

Let us justify the issue of one of the major projects that could be implemented in the country. According to Nepal's law, the project has to carry out environmental studies such as Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). EIA is the major tool to identify imminent impact on the society and environment of the particular developmental work. A group of experts consisting of people from almost all sector is involved in it. At the end of the study, either it recommends the project implementation or suggests possible alternatives. The report has to be passed by the government for implementation. If the EIA study has recommended for its implementation, it must be implemented and completed. If it has recommended some measures and they were not considered, they have to be carried out as soon as possible. That could not be the major problem to stop the project itself. Besides official EIA, sometimes donor agencies carry out a separate study for their own purpose. They invest only when they are assured of the sustainability of the project. Opposing experts' judgment, government declaration and community needs is against the public right. This is just an example. Any developmental activities should not face these hurdles, if we really want to develop ourselves. EIA studies are not expensive in the long-run since possible problems and mitigation measures are known before hand.

How are anti-developmental issues raised in Nepal? Why are some well-run factories are forced stopped? Why we do invest billions to conserve a wild animal instead of feeding hungry people? These are the controversial issues, which cannot be judged only from environmental point.

In the name of environment, three categories of activities are prevailing in the country. One category just raises the issues and sees only the problem. Making propaganda just helps them to lead for political activities. Another category is working on the problems already occurred or identified. They are the real workers. Other category is filing the gap between these two. Awareness, environmental campaigns and education, and problem identification are their major jobs. They search for the alternatives and solutions for identified problems so that impact can be minimised or stopped. By definition, all groups cannot be considered as environmentalists. No matter in which group you belong to, you should not misinform the people who are unaware, uneducated and unknown to the upcoming problems which they have never faced before.

The increasing food demand of the rapidly growing population cannot be fulfilled by traditional farming practice. Either we have to use chemical fertilizers and pesticides in decreasing agricultural land or genetically modify the pest resistant and high yield crops. The product has to be stored in the same or different form in an effective manner for future use if all cannot be consumed. If we oppose chemicals and genetically modified food in the name of environment at present, we don't have the best alternatives. Shall we consider environment or thousands of people dying because of hunger? Thousands of people in the country are dying each year due to lack of medicine and our hills are full of medicinal plants. Almost 85 percent of people are living in dark though we possess the potential to light the country and even region with hydro or solar power. We face drinking water scarcity as well as over-water problem each year. Instead of utilising the wide range of wild life and forest resources, local people are always in danger and threatened. These are few examples of potential natural resources in the country that can be properly utilised for the humankind.

We should not be proud on what natural resources we have, rather we should be proud on what we have utilised. Our concern should be on how many lives have been saved or people were benefited because of the resources. For the best utilisation of resources, we need to carry out developmental activities. Certainly, any activity has some effect on natural resources but we should not forget its positive side too. Opposing or stopping development in the name of environment is not justifiable. There are many options to minimise the impact of the problems. Natural process also has its own impact on the Earth, how could you stop it?

We all know that the strategy of sustainable development focuses on the use of available resources effectively and efficiently for the betterment of existing and future life. Developmental activities are the major tool for upgrading the quality of life. If we stop them, quality of life degrades. The people of developing countries always want higher economic growth, improved standards of living and greater access to markets of developed countries. These are human inherited characters and do not have any relation to environmental degradation. Nepal is rich in natural resources which can be used as a source for the betterment of life. Without consuming or exploiting our own resources, we can never improve the status of our life. The choice is ours; either make it comfortable or complicated.

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